Little Ironies of a Librarian's Life

By ADELE DE LEEUW.

"HAVE you," asks a man when you are alone at the desk with books overflowing both sides, a stack of cards to be filed awaiting your early attention and twelve impatient book-lovers standing first on one foot and then on the other, "have you 'Set Down in Malice'?"

"I'm not positive. Would you mind looking in the card catalogue?"

This is a perfectly legitimate question, but instantly the customer takes a violent dislike to you. He suspects you of trying to put him off. He glares at you, but you appear oblivious to the lightning in his eyes and finally he stalks off, as a great concession, and pulls open every drawer but the right one. If he is a superman he comes back and tells you that you do have it. Then he stands there. "Did you want it?" Of course," comes the response. You feel like an ungallant worm. "Can you tell me the number, please?" He stares at you as though you were crazy. "Number? The name of the book is 'Set Down in Malice.'" You can easily believe it. "Yes, I know," you tell him, patiently, "but if you will get the number for me—I am very busy—I can get the book for you." This is something of a bargain and he gets it, after you have told him that, no, it is not the 8 mo. 1917, but the number in the upper left hand corner of the card. He comes back after you have forgotten all about him and tells you that it is 824-C91, in a voice that condemns the whole library system as one ridiculous idiosyncrasy. You leave the desk, get the book, charge it, hand it to him and then——

"Oh, I don't think I want to take it out after all," he tells you as a punishment. "I just wanted to be sure that you had it." At this you exchange glances, but the less done in this line the better—for the librarian.

People develop an entirely different mien and attitude when they enter a library. Aside from a universal tendency to whisper in ghostlike sibiliance and creaking about on tiptoe as if they were in a house of death, and aside from their idea of being friendly and human to you, which is, alas, to comment at length on the weather, they all seem to have a distaste for divulging their names. It is like pulling teeth to get it out of some of them. Forced by your persistence, they finally mumble it under their breath and give a furtive glance around. "Smith," you manage to make out after long training. But there happen to be other Smiths in the file. "Is it the Smith on Summit avenue or the one on Sylvan place?" This would be a complete give away. "Any Smith will do," they say hastily. It takes tact and perseverance on the librarian's part to determine whether they are relatives and so permitted to use one another's cards.

If a woman is asked to hunt anything up herself her favorite plea is, "Oh, I forgot my glasses and you know——" Unfortunately, the librarian does. She knows that it is useless to argue with any woman who says she has forgotten her glasses. Men pretend to be deaf. They make so much trouble for the librarian that she gives in and gets it herself rather than continue shouting, "No, no, the stacks on the right."

The so-called reading public puts an almost pathetic faith in the omniscience of the librarian. Incidents like this are a daily occurrence. "Have you," queries a woman, "the book I took out last month?" "What was the name?" you ask. "Name? I don't remember." "Do you know who wrote it?" "Oh, no,' she says—in fact, they all say—"I never notice who writes books, or if I do I never remember. . . . But," she adds helpfully, "it was about this man, you know, and he falls in love with this girl, or no, she falls in love with him——" The librarian, if she has had any experience at all, interrupts desperately here. "Can't you think of the name of it?" "No, no, of course not. But—it had a green cover!" Poor soul, you hate to look what you feel. There are 70,000 books in the library and about 35,000 of them have been bound in green. It's a great help. . . . She looks at you reproachfully. "I thought a library kept account of what books people take out," she says in an injured voice. The trained librarian does not attempt to explain the system.

Then there are the strange tastes of people. You learn to know that to a discriminating few only may you mention the heretical fact that this new book is composed of short stories. "Oh, heavens, I never read a book of short stories!" Why? They don't, that's all. . . . You learn that the sweet faced, mild looking women want wild cave mannish fiction; the women who seem to have seen the world from a none too pleasant angle ask sepulchrally for "a nice, clean book. You know, nothing suggestive." You learn to know that the reason the man with the face of an insomniac can't sleep is because he reads detective novels until morning, and he says he can't sleep unless he reads and a good book keeps him awake. He has read all the murder yarns in the library and complains in the voice of a drug addict being deprived of his ration that there's nothing new and what is he going to do?

And you learn that there are more people with the souls of reformers than statistics will ever show. They come in with a book held gingerly between thumb and forefinger and drop it disdainfully on the desk. "That book," they announce in a voice meant to carry, "is not fit to be on the shelves of a decent library." You are glad, anyway, that they consider this a decent library. "Will you tell Miss X—— (the chief) that I said so? Or, no, *I* will go and tell her myself. It's terrible. I can't imagine how such things are allowed off the press. I can't see how they are *permitted* to circulate." The voice is rising slowly but surely. By and by, every reader will be two listening ears. "And to think that you haven't even put it in the restricted section! What if some *child* should get hold of it?" "Do you really think," you say, if inclined to argue, "that such a—sophisticated—book would make any impression on a child?" "Of course," comes the response without an instant's hesitation. "Why, it was all I could do to read it myself." "What do you object to?" "It's indecent. It's"—if they are very brazen they come on out with it—"it's positively immoral. Why, my dear," leaning over the desk, "that woman actually lives with that man in Paris. . . . Haven't you read it?" "Not yet," you admit. "Well, you ought to. Merely, that is, to see what trash is being written. It's terrible." And after they think you have more or less forgotten the conversation they say craftily, "Has this What's-His-Name written any other books?" You give them a list. "Not really!" A shake of the head. "Isn't it dreadful?" Wickedly, meanly, you say, "I'm sure you, with your cultured taste, will enjoy Trollope. Shall I get one of his books?" "Who's he? Modern?" "Oh, no, he wrote back in the Victorian days." "Never mind," they say hastily, with a forced smile, "I'm not reading old authors just now. You know how it is. I want to keep up with the new books. . . . Though, of course, I can't say they're worth it. After all, the old writers . . . But I can't take any to-night; thanks just the same." And a few days later they come back, you find, hunt up a book by What's-His-Name, have it charged in silence, and stalk out with it.

Then there are, of course, the other people who will read anything but a modern book. Some go on the assumption that the finer the print, the dingier the binding and the dustier the edges the better the book. Others first determine whether the author is dead before they will so much as glance at a page. They want, subconsciously, to be protected and a dead author is a wonderful protection to them. These people are generally a little dingy in appearance themselves. They have faded eyes and they are either very haughty and aloof or very sweet and condescending. You don't know which is worse. When they ask you for a good book you must be sure not to mention any one later than that young upstart Dickens. Shaw? Galsworthy? Bennett? "Are they good? I don't know them. Living? Oh, well, of course——"

A strange crew—these people who come up to the desk: the man who wants the complete history of Piscataway Township from the year 1837 to date; the woman who is reading Zola volume by volume simply because it is in the restricted section; the little girl who asks naively for a "real good story with lots and lots of love in it, for mama." Sometimes, dealing as you must at close quarters with their individual idiosyncrasies, you wonder whether there are any really discriminating readers at all; sometimes, in a benevolent mood, you wonder almost reverently at the consuming passion for reading that seems to be inherent in so many and such diverse people. And then once in a while, when you are tired from standing, flushed from hurry and irritated at the petty foibles of the people you serve, some one comes up to you and says in a glowing voice, "Oh, that was the loveliest book you gave me to read! I never read anything like it. It opened up a whole new world to me"; or "Do you know, I never thought literature—good books—could be so interesting. Will you help me again?"—and suddenly, completely, you are repaid for everything.

The Problem of James Crow: "Jim" Grown Up

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quarrel with employer; creating disturbance; misleading a mob; demanding $1.50 due as a bill for washing; being a negro minister. More than fifty colored women have been lynched in the last score of years—obviously not for rape.

The Mixing Bowl.

When you search for the motives underlying this bloody record, two stand out prominently: a desire to retain economic supremacy and a desire to retain purity of the race—or, to be more accurate, to prevent intermingling of negro men and white women.

What is a white man? What is a negro? Where does the one end and the other begin? In the Spanish and French West Indies a person having less than one-fourth negro blood was regarded as white; before 1860, in Virginia, the rule was the same. Legally, in many Southern States, the distinction to-day is drawn against any person having as much an one-eighth negro blood. Since 1790 the census enumerators, however, have accepted the popular Southern opinion and ranked as negro any person known or believed to have any negro blood whatsoever. Dr. Du Bois says that more than one-third of the negroes in the United States have some white blood. If the policy of the Southern whites has been to keep the races apart, it has failed completely.

There are two bywords of Southern thinking that are interesting in this connection: first, that no negress has any virtue; second, that immorality among the negro women keeps white women pure. Cases of colored by-wives were once common talk in the South; they still exist. There is little color line drawn among immoral women. In the country districts of the South, where loose white women are scarce, the colored women are always available. Thus we have a constant lowering of race purity, caused largely by white men—by young men of all families and by adults of the lower white classes, in the main.

It is interesting, in this connection, that Dr. Manoel de Oliviera Lima of Brazil, speaking this year before the Institute of Politics at Williams College, advocated intermarriage between the races as the solution of the problem. It was practiced, he stated, in Brazil; as a result, there are no discontented races to be found there. "Pure races," he stated, "are a historical error. . . . The Brazilian solution of the racial problem of the colored race, at least, is certainly wiser, more promising and, above all, more human than any solution which operates through separation or segregation." Brazil, the doctor may be reminded, is a backward land compared to ours; perhaps one of the reasons may lie here. But every witness is entitled to be heard from, so grievous is the problem.

James Crow.

The cornfield name of the field hand in slavery times was Jim Crow. Jim Crow is sixty years older now. He has earned a smatter of education; his children are found in small numbers in all our higher institutions of learning; they take an increasing part in the art, the finance, the direction of our country. There is a large residuum still low; but Jim Crow, the field hand or city furnace worker, became Private James Crow, Sergeant James Crow, Lieut. James Crow, Capt. James Crow during the war; he will not forget this. There are gentle negro leaders of the Booker Washington-Moton school, who advise acceptance of segregation, of Jim Crow street cars, trains, restaurants, theaters, schools, Y. M. C. A.s, Y. W. C. A.s, churches and the rest, not as a mark of inferiority but to permit independent flowering of each race. The social bond is rather close, to promise success for this plan.

Any Southern white leader of importance, once you secure his intimate opinion on the question, will admit that the whole working out tends toward amalgation. Not that he favors it; but that it is happening. Any thoughtful negro leader, however much he may object to the furtive way in which the absorption is taking place, will admit that this is the apparent end of the process.

What is the least we must give the modern negro?

Education—as full and free and ample as the white child should get. This is the first step.

Political rights. The complete right to express their opinion in matters of social welfare through duly elected representatives. A fair bestowal of the ballot, with or without a literacy test honestly administered, would give negro representatives wherever the negroes are in the majority, and choose one of their own race. A system of proportional representation would give them one-tenth of the members of Congress; they are entitled too to this. Why should a county with 75 per cent. of negroes always be represented by one of the minority?

Economic justice, on the same terms as it is given to white men. The right to labor for a similar wage; the right to purchase without gouging and extortion. Out of this will come—as it is beginning to come in Atlanta, New Orleans, Birmingham and other towns—wealthy negroes, who own their own residences, stores, banks, office buildings. The propertied negro is rarely the author of crimes of violence. The white race may have progressed further in this respect.

Legal justice. Equality before the court—which will insensibly spring out of education, political and economic justice and equitable negro participation in the administration of the law.

Beyond this no man can say with certainty. What worked satisfactorily in Brazil may fail here. The furtive commingling is a fact that increases; until science has spoken more authoritatively there is no need to go into the question of legalized commingling.

The Alternative.

Every Southerner who desires well of his homeland must favor educational, political and economic justice to the negro. The South is mentally and spiritually sterile; this is one result of keeping two-fifths of its children as close to the animal as can be maintained. No man who wishes well for that medieval section of the land can fail to regret this sterility and seek to end it.

More than this, the constant intensification of friction will earn, some unexpected day, a result undreamed of. The negroes were sheep once; they are so no longer. During the war they played the part of men, and men do not willingly lay aside the manly role for a squirming one. There was a time when a negro was expected to stand by and see the men of his family lynched, the women of his family ravished, without protestation. That time is ending. Blood is a promissory note, whose due date is more blood. It is in the hope of averting the blood doom that may spring from this landwide injustice that earnest words go out for a tardy fairness and a delayed equity.

It is not social equality that is needed now—it is social justice. When this is denied there have been cases where the shoe of oppression was worn on the other foot.

Can the South learn in time?